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ABSTRACT

A new approach taken to teach English to visiting West German teenagers in an immersion course in England emphasizes language use for fluency. Although the syllabus is designed to provide practice in all four language skills, it focuses on integrating the four skills, increasing productive skills, sensitizing the students to the value of paired and group work, encouraging increased independence and individualized learning, motivating students by involvement with the culture, and providing meaningful tasks and individual choice. Students complete a project for each week of attendance in the course, and all projects relate to a local shopping center and to weekly instructional modules. Each student takes home photocopies of all of the projects completed by his class for future reference. The approach has been successful in addressing the needs of groups with mixed abilities, making students aware of their language learning needs, and promoting student independence. It is also found to be unusual in that it sometimes subordinates traditional linguistic objectives to cultural, content, cognitive, and social learning objectives. The approach requires considerable effort and flexibility on the teacher's part, and is also fatiguing for students. (MSE)

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Project-based learning for foreign students in an English-speaking environment

Ursula Hilton-Jones

This article will describe a new syllabus, focussing on project-based learning as a means of fluency-type work for a group of teenage learners from West Germany. The setting was that of an immersion situation. The syllabus attempts to show how an English-speaking environment can be exploited by involving learners as language users in this environment. Project work revolved around a local shopping centre with free choice of topics for the students. After naming the aims and objectives of the syllabus, which were based on a needs analysis, the selection and organisation of course content will be explained. This will be followed by an outline of the various stages of course design and within the weekly modules. To conclude, some types of projects produced will be listed and the main insights gained from teaching the syllabus will be summarised.

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The teaching situation

This monolingual group of learners consisted of teenage boys and girls ranging between the ages of 12 to 19 with between two and eight years of classroom English behind them. They had come to England for an average of three weeks during their holidays to attend an English course. The students arrived and departed at different weekends to spend between

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one and six weeks on the course. There was considerable overlap insofar as some students' first week here could be other students' second or third week etc. At any given time there was a maximum of eight students only.

The following factors would have to be taken into account in the design of the syllabus: the above-mentioned time overlap in the students' stay, the varying levels of linguistic competence and cognitive development in this mixed-ability group and the need for a balance between 'school' and 'holidays'.

The needs analysis

The needs analysis was based on two different questionnaires which had been sent to each student and each student's English teacher, and an evaluation of the two most widely used course-books.

The students' questionnaires showed that course expectations concentrated on the overall short-term goal of a better mark at school, with a special emphasis on improvement in their output, i.e. improved spoken fluency and a higher competence in written work. An analysis of the teachers' recommendations in their questionnaires demonstrated strong agreement with the students' wishes to improve their productive skills. However, the evaluation of the teachers' questionnaires seemed to indicate that most of the students were used to individual and whole-class work only.

The assessment of the two most widely used course-books confirmed that strict adherence to these books meant an almost total exclusion of pair and groupwork and an overwhelming focus on accuracy. Therefore it

seemed likely that the students would have expectations of the same methodology and the same type of feedback (i.e. with such a focus on accuracy as emphasised in the coursebooks an expectation of high frequency error correction). For this reason the incorporation of an introductory stage to the language course was seen as necessary. This should provide explicit explanations to the students about the use of pair and group work as classroom procedures, the possibly different use of feedback and the teacher's role as participant and resource, and not just as manager and controller,within a communicative methodology.

The analysis of the coursebooks further showed that there seemed to be a predominance of written or oral tasks at sentence level only, and an absence of any teaching on cohesion and other features of discourse, as well as a lack of skill integration.

Because the mainpoint emanating from the analysis of the course-books and possibly the students' previous English-learning experiences seemed to be lack of fluency practice, the syllabus for the students' stay in England was to emphasise use-related language experiences.

Aims and objectives

The following aims and objectives were drawn up for which the syllabus was to cater:

1. to provide the students with the opportunity to draw on their language store to allow them to make the connection between language

as usage and language as use (Widdowson, 1978)

2. to provide practice in all four skills, but to focus on skill integration

3. to increase competence in the productive skills to fulfil the students' expectations and short term goal of improving their marks at school

i.e. to encourage the use of spoken English for meaningful interaction in a natural environment

- within the classroom
- within the immersion setting of the house/ school

and to make the discourse structure of different text-types explicit and to provide guidance and practice for writing at discourse level

4. to sensitise the learners to the advantages of pair and groupwork

5. to provide a learner training component at the beginning of the course plus support throughout the course

6. to encourage increasing independence from the teacher and to allow individualised learning

7.to motivate and to increase the understanding of the foreign cultural background by involving the students in the study of this background and in interaction with people from this background

8. to provide meaningful tasks and activities with individual choices and

9. to enable each student to complete one written project per weekly module.

The selection of course content

Project-based learning was to be understood in two ways. Firstly, each student was required to hand in one written mini-project per week. Secondly, the unification of theme relating to each mini-project was achieved by the

overall project , the local shopping centre.

This is a new and modern shopping- complex within a ten-minute walk from the house/ school. Previous years' students had gone there of their own choice on an almost daily basis, had shown interest in it, had commented on it and compared it with shopping facilities in their home environment.

As the local shopping centre had seemed to form such an integral part of their London experience, it was presumed that future students would be equally interested in it. By choosing the shopping centre as the course content I hoped to provide motivation:

- it is easily accessible physically for the purposes of student 'research'
- it is real and provides a counter-balance to the characters who did or did not provide a theme or continuity in the coursebooks
- it takes the students into their English-speaking environment. This means that active and conscious learning which can start with learning how to look continues beyond the classroom. It thus increases the chances of student involvement and of interaction with native and non-native speakers of English, and gives an experience of language as 'use' and provides authentic, new and unique experiences
- the students bring their own knowledge and experience tothe tasks, and in return the completed tasks can serve to promote and differentiate the students' thinking after their return home. This means that a general educational principle is at work
- skill-integration comes about naturally, because the project represents part of real life

- the use of authentic materials is of paramount importance for the purposes of information gathering. Language input through reading or listening (e.g. to interviewees) will therefore also be authentic.
- project work also appears to be a good way of acquainting those students who are not used to it to co-operate with others through pair and groupwork, and these ways of working can be carried over into classroom procedures or vice versa
- students can choose aspects of the project according to their own interest; because of having a choice students might be more inclined to accept responsibility for their learning in the process towards completion of their weekly mini-project
- students are exposed to a situation where they have to draw on previously learnt knowledge and will create the link to successfull communication themselves and/or develop communication strategies as well as awareness of their language needs
- the overall project promotes the understanding of the foreign cultural background by involving the students as whole persons, i.e. intellectually, emotionally and practically
- using the shopping centre as a teaching aid and learning resource is innovative.

The exact linguistic course content was only vaguely definable because of the variety of topics associable with a shopping centre which the students could devise themselves.

The organisation of course content

The organising principle for running a course with students arriving and departing on a weekly basis was by having weekly modules. These modules were interchangeable as there was no sequencing or grading between the modules over the eleven-week teaching period.

There was, however, a progression through different stages within each module, whereby the students should be able to 'do' more on day 5, the Friday of each week, than on day 1, the Monday of each week.

Day 1 of each module had to be different according to whether a student was a newcomer or not. If he or she was a newcomer, he or she started with the introduction and learner training component of the course. During that time the other students worked independently, e.g. despite an overall focus on fluency work accuracy work had to form part of the course as this type of work was expected by the students from their previous experience. Self-access materials catered for each student's linguistic needs. The tasks were based on consolidation of insights from feedback on previous weeks' work and were individualised. Some of them were presented as grammar problem-solving tasks which could be tackled as pairwork whereby both inductive and deductive learning could take place. Another type of teacher-independent work for the non-newcomers on each Monday was the discussion and preparation of their next mini-project.

Stages of course design and within the weekly modules

Step 1 Orientation tasks in the pre-sessional phase

The weekend of arrival was to serve as an implicit introduction and

initial familiarisation with the shopping centre and other strategic points like the nearest underground station, cinema, theatre etc.

Each student had a map of the local suburb, a blank layout map of the shopping centre, and a set of instructions. Each student had the same basic instructions and a location task which varied from person to person.

Step 2 The preparation stage

This stage started on each student's first course day with a feedback session on the fact-finding tasks of the pre-sessional phase. The information was shared and entered on everybody's layout plan of the shopping centre. Additional information, e.g. the opening times of the library, banks etc., was entered in the students' notebooks. The collected information was relevant for future reference.

Topics related to the shopping centre, of which all students could now be presumed to have some impressions, formed the subject of a 'brain-storming' session which resulted in a spidergram. This acted as a prompt at the beginning of each weekly module for the selection of the mini-project.

Stage 3 The 'research' and pre-teaching stage

This stage took the students out of the classroom for the purpose of information gathering through e.g. collecting brochures or interviewing people.

Pre-teaching solely concerned the structuring and cohesion of the various text-types involved in the projects. Neither lexis nor structures formed part of pre-teaching. These were 'fed' to the students at the point of need in their writing processes.

Step 4 The collation stage

Students who collected written material were then reading with the purpose of extracting specific information for note-taking. Those who explored the shopping centre visually would already have taken notes 'on the spot'. They then embarked on their writing in connection with their chosen topics, from drafting, editing and re-writing to producing the final version. Peer-teaching and peer-correction played a vital role here before comments by the teacher.

Step 5 The presentation stage

At the end of each weekly module the final versions were offered to the group who acted as an audience for discussion. Each student or pair orally reported on their topic and how they had dealt with it. This highlighted the process the project had gone through. The projects were then passed around or read aloud.

Step 6 The reflection phase

At the end of each student's stay s/he took a folder home with photo-copies of all the projects completed by his/her class. This way there was a potential anonymuos readership in the form of other students' families, friends, teachers and class mates for each piece of written work. The students were told this at the beginning of their course. The folder also supplied each student at the same time with models of different text-types to draw from in the future.

All stages involved communication for a real purpose among the students, the students and the teacher or the students and people outside the classroom. Therefore this kind of project-work can claim to be firmly

embedded in a communicative methodology. The length of time for each step cannot be seen as rigidly fixed, but must be regarded as flexible.

Types of topics chosen for projects:

The following topics were covered in projects during the eleven-week trial period of the syllabus:

diary: e.g. A week in the life of the centre

report: e.g. on interviews conducted with shoppers on questions such as:

How often do you shop here?

Which is your farourite shop?

How do you get to the centre?

(All reports were accompanied by graphs or pie charts)

summary: e.g. The most important information about the background history of the centre(based on reading a brochure)

comparison: e.g. The shop windows of two cosmetic shops

Different kinds of cameras

classification: e.g. Types of jobs in the centre

Types of shops in the centre

survey: e.g. Shop opening times

Proportion of men/women at their place of work in the centre

(All surveys were accompanied by graphs or pie charts)

description: e.g. The architecture of the centre (plus guide and map for an architectural sightseeing tour)

guide: e.g. A day out in: St. Albans

Brighton (plus route and map)

narrative: a story prompted by the sculpture of a horse in the centre

entitled "The Black Horse Black Lightning"

recipe: for the project "shopping for a meal and cooking it"

e.g. ravioli

apple cake

Conclusion

One of the main insights gained from teaching the syllabus was that project work made it possible to cater for the varied needs of a mixed ability group of learners. This was accomplished through individual choice of project topics which led to writing according to the language level previously achieved. However, the projects did not only recycle already learnt knowledge, but also served to make the students aware of their further language learning needs as lexis and structures were supplied to them which were hitherto unknown but which they wanted to incorporate in their writing.

Furthermore, end-of-course questionnaires seemed to indicate that the students found their 'research' trips into the English-speaking environment motivating and useful for giving them a feeling of increasing independence.

It was also demonstrated that language learning can take place if the linguistic aims are not always superior to other aims, as seemed to have been the case in the students' English learning experience up to then.

Other learning aims in project-based learning like:

- environmental and cultural studies,

- content-based learning on subjects like architecture,
- cognitive development through problem-solving and information transfer to and from tables, charts, pie-charts and graphs,
- social learning through co-operation, i.e. peer-teaching and -learning in pairs and small groups,
- and the aquisition of study/life-skills

took predominance over purely linguistic aims at times. This meant that language was produced as a natural by-product of other types of learning and helped promote the students' fluency.

It was clear that project work would require careful preparation by the teacher and a considerable workload from the teacher during its implementation, as well as a great deal of flexibility because of the unpredictability of topic choices. It can, however, offer a rich learning environment and is well worth undertaking for those who teach in English-speaking countries, whether or not in an immersion situation. Project work can also successfully be undertaken in classrooms in a non-English speaking country.

Lastly, a word of warning: project work can produce project fatigue. The bulk of the mini-projects demanded factual writing, and I decided that any future course had to incorporate more outlets for the expression of personal opinions and feelings through e.g. free writing and whole-class discussions in the interest of a better balance.

Reference

Widdowson, H. G. Teaching Language as Communication, 1978; p. 3 OUP

The author

Ursula Hilton-Jones is a freelance teacher of English as a Foreign Language. She received the equivalent of a first degree in TEFL from Padagogische Hochschule Hannover, Germany. She followed this up with a post-graduate Diploma in English Studies (Methodology and Teaching Materials Design) at Ealing College of Higher Education in 1987. She has been teaching private courses for the last ten years. She has just registered with the CNAA on a part-time basis for a research-based M.Phil/Ph.D. which will deal with the writing process in a foreign language.

Project-based learning for foreign learners in an English-speaking environment

Ursula Hilton-Jones, (Freelance, UK)

STEPS IN SETTING UP PROJECT-WORK:

1. Background Information

Project-work was set into a context of a syllabus for summer school learners in an immersion situation.

The learners constituted a predominantly monolingual group with a maximum of eight students.

Project-work revolved around the local shopping-centre and was organised in weekly modules.

2. Step 1. Orientation tasks in the pre-sessional phase

The weekend of arrival is to serve as an implicit introduction and initial familiarization with the shopping-centre and other strategic points like the nearest underground stations.

Each student has a map of the local suburb, a blank layout map of the shopping centre, and a set of instructions. Each student has the same basic instructions and a location task which varies from person to person.

3. Step 2. The Preparation Stage

This stage starts with a feedback session on the fact-finding tasks in the pre-sessional phase. The information is shared and entered on everybody's layout plan of the shopping-centre. Additional information, e.g. the opening times of the library, is entered in the students' notebooks. The collected

information is relevant for future reference.

Topics related to the shopping-centre form the subject of a 'brainstorming' session which results in a spidergram. This acts as a prompt at the beginning of each weekly module for the selection of the project.

4. Step 3. The Implementation and pre-teaching Stage

This stage takes the students out of the classroom for the purpose of information gathering through collecting brochures or interviewing people.

Pre-teaching solely concerns the structuring and cohesion of the various text-types involved in the projects.

Neither lexis nor structures form part of pre-teaching.

These are 'fed' to students at the point of need in their writing processes.

5. Step 4. Collation Stage

Students who collected written material are reading with the purpose of extracting specific information for note-taking.

Those who explored the shopping-centre visually will already have taken notes 'on the spot'.

They then embark on their writing in connection with their chosen topics, from drafting, editing and re-writing to

producing the final version.

Peer-teaching and peer-correction play a vital role here before comments by the teacher.

6. Step 5. The Presentation Stage

At the end of each weekly module the final versions are offered to the group who acts as an audience for discussion. Each student orally reports on his/her topic and how s/he dealt with it. This highlights the process the project went through. The projects are then passed around or read aloud.

7. Step 6. The Reflection Phase

At the end of each student's stay s/he takes a folder home with photocopies of all the projects completed by his/her class. This way there is a potential anonymous readership in the form of other pupils' families, friends, teachers and class mates for each written piece of work.

At the same time each student is supplied with models of different text-types to draw from in the future.